UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 TEL AVIV 002534

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SUBJECT: MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS: WHERE THE CANDIDATE IS KING

REF: A. TEL AVIV 2505
     ¶B. JERUSALEM 2013

¶1. Summary: Israeli voters went to the polls November 11 to
choose their mayors and municipal councils. Incumbent Ron
Huldai won re-election in Tel Aviv, while secular candidate
Nir Barkat (formerly affiliated with Kadima) defeated
ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) candidate Meir Porush (UTJ) in
Jerusalem (reftels). Two female mayors in Israel, Miriam
Feierberg (Likud) in Netanya and Yael German (Meretz) in
Herzliya, were re-elected. Results for individual council
seats have not yet been released in Ra'anana, where women
candidates could form the majority of a municipal council for
the first time in the history of Israel. Arab participation
(except for Jerusalem) was remarkably high, with Israel Radio
reporting an 80 percent turnout, compared to 40 percent for
the general population -- down from 49.5 percent in 2003 and
the lowest overall turnout ever registered. Kadima claimed
it has become the largest faction in local government by
winning 50 mayoral races (out of 260) and increasing council
seats across the country, but the Kadima Council President
was unseated in Rishon-Letzion and the party's total number
of mayors is down from the nearly 80 mayors who joined Kadima
shortly after former PM Sharon founded the party in 2005.
Likud and Labor did not invest heavily in these elections,
and only a dozen or so mayors allied to each of these parties
won. Shas won four municipalities where the ultra-Orthodox
(Haredi) population is significant, but its nationwide reach
was limited. Yisrael Beiteinu claims that the elections
broadened its national base, and, like Kadima, hopes to use
the political apparatus deployed in the municipal elections
to get out the vote in general elections on February 10. End
Summary.

TURNOUT DOWN

¶2. Even with a younger threshold for voting in these
municipal elections, overall participation decreased to just
40 percent of voters (who are eligible if they are 17 or
older). This figure was down from 49.5 percent in 2003, and
the lowest ever according to Ma'ariv newspaper.
Consequently, some results were less revealing than they
might first appear. For example, Miriam Feierberg (Likud)
won re-election in the coastal city of Netanya with a
resounding 81 percent of the vote. However, as only seven
percent of the electorate voted in Netanya, Feierberg
received the support of only one in twenty eligible voters.
A Jerusalem Post analysis blamed the low turnout on three
reasons: (1) Israel, a small country both in population and
geography, has many pressing national issues that leave
little energy for voters to focus on local issues; (2) a
world-wide trend of decreasing participation in the political
process at all levels; and (3) as detailed in Ref A, local
authorities in Israel do not have a great deal of power or
revenues to work with, and thus "the significance of local
elections is not as great as local politicians would like to
make it sound." This disinterest was shared by the media, as
the Jerusalem Post, like Ha'aretz, did not carry a section on
their website devoted to the Israeli municipal elections.

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TEL AVIV STATUS QUO, SHAKE-UPS IN THE SOUTH
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¶3. Incumbent Ron Huldai, who has been associated with the
Labor Party but now heads an independent list, won
re-election in Tel Aviv, defeating challenger Dov Khenin, an
MK with the Hadash party (formerly "communist" but now a
mixed Jewish-Arab party on the far left), who headed an
independent slate that garnered an equal number of Council
seats. The two longest-serving mayors in Israel fell, as Zvi
Tzilker lost to Yehiel Lasri (Likud) after 33 years as mayor
of Ashdod, while Meir Nitzan (Kadima) lost to Dov Tzur after
25 years as mayor of Rishon Letzion. Nitzan is the President
of the Kadima Party Council and has announced his retirement
from politics. Rubik Danilovitz easily defeated the
Kadima-aligned incumbent, Yaakov Turner, in Beersheva, while
former mayor David Buskila returned to office in Sderot,
besting the wife of former Labor Party leader Amir Peretz.
Yona Yahav (Kadima, formerly Labor) beat off challenger
Yaacov Borovsky to win re-election as mayor of Haifa. Ramez
Jaraisy was re-elected in Nazareth, the largest Arab city in
Israel. Jaraisy defeated a list that included members of the
Islamic Movement, which lost its majority on the Nazareth
council to Jaraisy's secular Hadash party -- even though
Nazareth's population is approximately 70 percent Muslim. In
Rehovot, Rahat (the largest Bedouin city in Israel) and a few
smaller cities, no mayoral candidate received the minimum
threshold of 40 percent of the vote, which means that a
run-off election will be held in two weeks between the top
two vote-getters. Council seats are divided proportionally

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according to the percentage of votes each party/group list
receives.

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WOMEN MAYORS
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¶4. The glass ceiling in Israeli politics remains strong, as
only 3 of 25 cabinet members and 18 of 120 Knesset members
are women. The only two confirmed winners among the 32 women
mayoral candidates were incumbents Miriam Feierberg (Likud)
in Netanya and Yael German (Meretz) in Herzliya. Flora
Shushan -- sister of former Labor Party leader Amir Peretz --
appeared to be leading the mayoral race in Mitzpeh Ramon,
where she has served as Acting Mayor, but the vote will be
decided by the absentee ballots of the military, which have
yet to be counted. If Shushan wins, she will become only the
11th elected, female mayor in the history of Israel. Results
for individual council seats have not yet been released, but
if women gain a majority on the Ra'anana municipal council
(women held 10 of 20 seats going into the election) it will
be the first time women have controlled a majority of any
municipal council in Israel. Early reports indicate that
Arab voters in Israel turned out in much higher numbers than
the general population: 80 percent according to Israel Radio,
compared to 40 percent among the general population. Only
the official tallies, which will be published in 20 days,
will reveal the precise participation statistics and final
results, but the overall trend has been decreasing
participation in both local and national elections.

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POSTSCRIPT ON LOCAL POLS AND PARTY TIES
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¶5. The national party ties of many candidates are tenuous,
and local issues dominated most races. Tel Aviv mayor Huldai
is identified as a member of the Labor Party, but like most
Israeli mayors he is known and elected for his personality
and personal policies, not his national party affiliation.
Haifa mayor Yahav is nominally Kadima, but ran under the "Our
Haifa" banner. Conversely, some local parties with

independent-sounding names are in fact affiliated with one of
the national parties. Netanya mayor Feierberg, for example,
appeared on the ballot under "One Netanya" but is a member of
and supported by the Likud Party, albeit less strongly tied
to her national party than local Democratic and Republican
politicians tend to be in the United States. Moreover, many
mayors shop around to see where they can get the most of what
they want from the national government. Ha'aretz reported a
slight increase in female council members, and attributed the
gains to the growth of independent lists, saying they offered
more opportunities for women than "Labor and Likud's practice
of choosing army veterans as candidates."

¶6. Nonetheless, Kadima -- with their goal of forming the next
Government -- and the Green Party -- with their goal of
entering the next Knesset -- invested heavily in the
municipal elections in the hopes they would build momentum
toward the national elections in February. Major traditional
power parties, Likud and Labor, meanwhile, invested little in
these municipal elections in order to conserve scarce funds
and concentrate strategy on the national elections. Kadima
claimed it has become the largest faction in local government
by winning 50 mayoral races, with the media quoting Vice
Premier Haim Ramon as saying their success "creates a future
infrastructure -- it is significant" and municipal campaign
head Yoel Hasson as claiming that Likud and Labor "have
nearly been erased." A Kadima contact assessed that even
though Kadima came away from the elections with fewer mayors
than it had hoped, the party strengthened its position with
new seats in municipal councils across the country. Likud
and Labor only won a little more than a dozen mayoral races
each. The Green Party nearly doubled its representation by
winning 50 seats on municipal councils, bolstering the minor
party's hopes of landing its first-ever Knesset seats in
February's national elections.

¶7. Labor Party Secretary-General Etan Cabel announced that
he was pleased with the results, saying Labor had
strengthened the party "with a small budget" and brought
about "a change in leadership in many cities." According to
Shas Party Chairman Eli Yishai, Shas won four mayoral races,
and was "continuing the revolution it started with the local
authorities, and will end in elections to Knesset." (Yishai,
however, admitted to a "stinging" loss for the Haredim in
Jerusalem.) Chairman Avigdor Lieberman claimed that Yisrael
Beiteinu "doubled its power" and that "will lead to the party
doubling its power in the general elections." Likud was
relatively silent on the significance of the municipal
elections, and an aide to Party Chairman Netanyahu explained
to poloff that the municipal elections were about "local
issues, not national politics."

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